

TT No.14: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 25th August 2009; **North Shields** v Northallerton Town; Northern League Division Two; Res: 4-1; Att: 80; Admission: £3; Programme: £1 (36pp); FGIF Match Rating: ***.

Body blows don't come much more painful or damaging than the one suffered by North Shields in 1992. The Robins, who lifted the FA Amateur Cup at Wembley in 1969, had clinched promotion from the Northern Counties East League to the Northern Premier League in treble-winning fashion when a cash crisis sent them crashing to the canvas. The club had to sell their well-appointed (but subsidence-affected) Appleby Park ground - capable of holding 15,000, and one of the finest on the North East non-league scene - to a developer to pay massive debts and were forced to start again at Wearside League level. Shields, who after flitting about Wallsend for a while now play at the rather more modest Ralph Gardner Park, in Chirton and next to the infamous Meadowell housing estate, climbed back into the Northern League in 2004 and are looking this season to get out of the Second Division and maintain upward progress.

To recover from such a shattering setback indicates just how much pride there is in the North Shields club. This is apparent from the state of the ground. A number of undesirables can still be counted among their neighbours, so the Robins have to cope with morale-sapping break-ins and petty vandalism. Witness the state of the official car park next to Silkey's Lane. I've never seen one (and I include South Liverpool's old Holly Park ground in my calculations) so covered with broken glass. But what little Shields have is clearly cherished, with nearly every surface decked in the club's scarlet colours.

Ralph Gardner Park has been developed from a bare pitch which was originally an unremarkable part of the Collingwood View playing fields. The main entrance, at the west end, is guarded by a changing room block positioned outside the ground. This (frankly rather ugly) windowless structure is of red brick, with one of those curious multi-angled roofs so loved by architects prone to indulging flights of fancy. A surveyor would wince at the unnecessary changes in roof line. The loos, incidentally, are to be found here, in case you get to half-time with a knot in it and can't find them in the ground. There isn't a bar or social club - Shields repair to the Oddfellows in town for a post-match pint. In a fence enclosing the ground and made of something akin to railway sleepers, a couple of gates provide access for players and spectators. Two portable buildings, painted black, on the left side of this (near) end house the pay cabin, club shop, goalposts, nets and flags. The team line-ups are written on a whiteboard and displayed here - always a thoughtful touch when there isn't a public address system. Another portable building, in blue, to the right has a kitchen and an area of seats to consume refreshments under cover. On this evening, the DVD of the FA Amateur Cup Final victory over Sutton United - in front of 47,000 - was being shown. Also, on sale were framed, signed prints of Toon legend Malcolm 'Supermac' MacDonald, the club president. Yet

another container in the south-west corner is home to the groundsman's equipment.

The main stand, sponsored by the local Beacon shopping centre, dominates the north side of the ground. This modern metal structure, about 20 yards long and five yards deep, shelters five battered rows of wooden bench seats and features the sponsor's name on its fascia. Four roof columns and a floodlight mast make for tricky viewing. Between the stand and the corner flag on the west side are three rows of rudimentary, old-fashioned terracing made up of planks, pegs and compacted earth. The east side of this part of the ground is overgrown. A steep bank, the top of which provides an excellent vantage point, leads up to the boundary fence, with tree-lined West Percy Road and modern houses behind.

Two simple wooden covers, flanking a central floodlight mast, provide spectator accommodation on the south side. Beneath each is an area of flattened earth, and another basic step of terracing. Twin dugouts, of brick with corrugated sheeting roofs, are positioned either side of the stands, partially obscuring vision to the corners. Everything is bright red. To the rear are two football pitches - one railed off - and then a number of scruffy buildings, used by a van hire company, a MOT centre and a joiner, along Waterville Road. The Tyne & Wear Metro line beyond can be heard rather than seen.

Weeds seem to have got a grip on much of the rest of Ralph Gardner Park, but the flagged hardstanding which encloses the pitch is largely unspoilt. Railings, finished neatly in red and white, keep spectators and players in their designated areas. The playing fields stretch away behind the east end until they meet row upon row of red-brick terraces, which separate Meadowell - the scene of rioting in 1991, and now regenerated thanks to £66m of investment - from the town centre. The floodlights are masts, with three per side and four unusually large lamps on each.

Less than a quarter of a mile to the south of the ground, the silvery Tyne flows, en route to its dramatic estuary at neighbouring Tynemouth. This, incidentally, is the place to head for a spot of pre-match exploration. North Shields, once all miners and mariners, is workaday depressing, and best avoided, but genteel Tynemouth simply shimmers with affluent loveliness. Boasting a castle, priory, and stunning statue to Trafalgar hero Admiral Lord Collingwood, and rife with sandy beaches, floral displays and elegant town houses, this chic town still has much of the Victorian resort atmosphere and charm which made it so popular with trippers when the railway first opened up this part of the coast in 1882. The epoch-launching station, including its magnificent glass canopies, now has Grade II listing.

The game on a perfect evening, clear, mild and still, was a typical Northern League affair - fast, furious and physical. Shields emerged comfortable winners, despite playing the last 15 minutes with 10 men, as they built on their first win of the season, at Brandon United, the previous weekend. Had Northallerton taken two great chances when only one down, though, the outcome might have been different. The home team had a problem finishing in the early stages, and when visiting keeper Stephen Craggs wasn't getting in the way, a post denied James

Luccock, this after he had capitalised on one of several telling Ross Atkinson passes with a well-struck drive from 12 yards. Such was the Robins' superiority, a goal had to come. And two arrived in six minutes. Luccock sent over a free-kick from the right, and skipper Brian Smith (31) was given the time and space to pick his spot with a 12-yard downward header. Northallerton right-back Chris Walker was badly at fault for the second. He failed to control a knock-back from Femi Akinbolu, and Robbie Livermore (37) nipped in to steer a close-range prod wide of the helpless Craggs. Between the goals, though, the visitors fluffed two openings. Ben Darville, sliding in, failed to get enough power on an effort from the edge of the six-yard box when Nicholas Lyons' probing cross had put the chance on a plate. And Gary Mitchell shot weakly at Shields keeper Michael Robinson when through. The home team scored again a minute before the break. Visiting skipper Martin Butterworth appeared to be fouled on the halfway line, but play was allowed to continue and Akinbolu lobbed Craggs from the edge of the box with the Northallerton defence again in disarray.

The Yorkshiremen shot themselves in the foot once more in the 61st minute. Craggs somehow managed to fumble a regulation catch from an Anthony Lowther free-kick, and Smith hooked the ball into the empty net from 12 yards. That pretty much killed things until, with 15 minutes to go, Smith, already booked, got himself sent off for handball in the penalty area. It looked a harsh decision by Ryhope referee Kevin McKitterick, whose fussiness did not endear him to either set of fans. As Smith trooped off disconsolately, he pointed to his shoulder as the point of impact. Mitchell wasn't bothered, and sent Robinson the wrong way from the spot. This heralded a strong finish from Northallerton, but the closest they went to a second goal was when big centre-back Grant Hickman had a towering header smuggled off the line. A full-back covering his post. Yippee!

So, a corner appears to have been turned by North Shields. On this evidence, they may have the quality to sustain a promotion challenge. But the Northern Premier League is a long way off. Much has to be done before the Class of 1992's achievements can be matched, though at least the re-formed club are living within their means.